THE POPULAR FRONT AND CENTRAL EUROPE: THE DILEMMAS OF FRENCH IMPOTENCE, 1918–1940

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Introduction

Traditionally, study of French foreign policy between the world wars has been bounded by two, interlocking perceptions. French diplomats and military are said to have been obsessed with Great Britain and with taking no real initiative without British backing, while French strategy is said to have been almost exclusively concerned with sheltering behind an impregnable Maginot line in the absence of a strong alliance with Great Britain. This book begins by questioning both these propositions in their more absolute forms, and, in so doing, it reinterprets such diplomatic landmarks of the 1930s as the Hoare-Laval Plan and the Rhineland crisis. It also argues for a broad consistency in French strategy in the inter-war period, obsessed not with being pinioned behind the Maginot line (although certainly fortifications were important to French defence), but with carrying a war outside of French territory. This leads to a linkage between earlier French strategy towards the eastern allies and Italy and the reckless French dash to Holland in 1940, which until now has been regarded as contradictory and aberrant. In the picture it draws of French external policy between 1919 and 1940, this book seeks to refocus on the topography of the Danube and the Vistula in the landscape of the 1930s, in order to analyse how the conditions of possible diplomatic and military disaster emerged.

The primacy previously assigned to Great Britain is at the heart of current debate amongst French and British scholars over the role of 'la gouvernante anglaise', the British governess.[1] Whatever its broad constraints, and there were many, French policy had its own internal logic, which, as French archival sources show, was sometimes concealed from British policy-makers. Chapter 1, which examines

[1] The phrase was coined by François Bédarida to describe British tutelage of France in the 1930s. F. Bédarida, 'La "gouvernante anglaise"', in René Rémond and Janine Bourdin (eds.), *Edouard Daladier chef du gouvernement* (Paris, 1977), pp. 228–40.

the diplomacy of Louis Barthou and Pierre Laval and the response of the French General Staff to the Ethiopan crisis of 1935, uses internal military and diplomatic memoranda to show that in the mid 1930s the French hoped for benevolent British neutrality, while relying upon a military entente with Italy as an all-purpose bridge to its allies in East Central Europe. (In this context, it is significant that economic data on the implications of a flagging commercial performance for France's ability to arm its allies can be linked back to an Italophile tendency in French diplomacy and strategy, thus composing a previously ignored unity of high policy in the early and mid 1930s.) The key importance attached to Italy well after the Ethiopian crisis of 1935 was inseparable from the importance the General Staff attached to a strategy of distant fronts, a strategy in which eastern allies would bear the brunt of German force. Britain, whatever its strengths, could never altogether supplant the Italian factor in French military planning for a war of coalition.

The prolonged Italophile agony of the General Staff as well as the suppositions with which the French military supported the eastern alliances from the 1920s suggest the strength of military attachment to fighting a war elsewhere by means of allies who would channel and divert German force. The Italian, Polish, and Czech ties thus came to represent an even more defensive strategy than the Maginot line. Their importance actually increased for the French General Staff in the critical period after the Rhineland reoccupation in March 1936. Some of the conclusions drawn from the military archives may surprise. Without knowledge of the military's presuppositions for wars of coalition, they may even appear counter-intuitive. But then few events in modern history have been more surprising or more counter-intuitive than the fall of France.

If the relationship between France's eventual betrayal of its eastern allies and the fall of France itself is critical to the book's argument, its core is those chapters which concern the year-long government of the Socialist Léon Blum. Blum's foreign policy, notably his abiding concern with the defence of Czechoslovakia, is usually neglected on the assumption that his external concerns were limited to the Spanish Civil War and occasional conversations with Hjalmar Schacht, the head of the Reichsbank. In fact the Front populaire was unusually active in negotiations with its Central European allies: Poland, and the three countries of the Petite Entente, Czechoslovakia, Roumania and Yugoslavia.

Histories of the Third Republic justly set great store on governmental instability to explain French impotence in the face of the Hitlerian threat. While it is true that many official decision-makers were figures of legendary permanence, such as Alexis Léger, Maurice Gamelin, and Philippe Pétain, the evanescence and instability of individual ministries certainly created destructive impressions abroad. The analysis here, however, concentrates on the impact of ideology on French diplomacy and strategy during the Blum Government, and includes suppressed testimony from the Riom trials, the political trials organised by the Pétain Government at German behest which were intended to inculpate France's leaders from 1936 for the defeat in 1940. The impact of ideology in external affairs can more readily be seen on the military than on Blum himself. The core chapters trace the impact of ideology on the military's response to the divergent claims for support of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR. A case study of the Franco-Polish arms accord of 1936 reveals the Front populaire's attempts to remedy the negligence of its predecessors in arming its allies, against the backdrop of the determination of the General Staff and the French Embassy in Warsaw to cultivate Poland and Italy as counterweights to pressures within Blum's Government for a Soviet military entente. Direct Soviet influence on the Franco-Petite Entente negotiations of 1936–7 and Soviet pressures for bilateral staff talks with France set in still sharper relief the ideological constraints which isolated the Blum Government and its Czechoslovak ally.

Blum's brief Government is of particular interest for several reasons: first, the way in which internal struggle for control of the government's foreign policy in East Central Europe reflected aspects of the acute domestic social crisis in 1936–7; and secondly, the way in which the Spanish war narrowed French perceptions of the plight of Czechoslovakia once Blum fell from power. Perhaps most significantly, in the period after the Rhineland reoccupation Hitler began his diplomatic revolution in Europe by a process of ideological selection. Ideology distorted power perceptions in Europe and allowed Hitler the enormous psychological advantage of disarming his potential adversaries one by one. The ideological turbulence surrounding the Popular Front period is essential to an understanding of the French abandonment of Czechoslovakia and thereby of the defeat in 1940. Chapter 7 then surveys the process whereby

war on the cheap – that is, on the peripheries – was lost, as French strategic options were reduced from the relatively unencumbered eastern terrain to the confines of Belgium, where one mistake would expose the sacred patrimony to another invasion.

Among various interwoven themes, military, economic, diplomatic, and ideological, the realities and the illusions of power politics are probed, in order to question conventional divisions between the survival of great and the survival of small powers in a century in which no single power has been great enough to sustain the human and financial costs of total war. For this over-arching reason, attention is given in the pages which follow to the psychology of individuals as different as General Maurice Gamelin and Premier Léon Blum. Marc Bloch, a veteran of both the world wars, reflected that the course of human events is governed in the last analysis by human psychology.[2] The chief psychological fact of Bloch's book, as in some sense of this one, is a tragic reluctance to shed French blood again in self-defence. Gamelin's policy of interposing allies and diverting German force elsewhere, his fixation on an Italy even less willing to fight than France; Léon Blum's deep shame at the temptation, snare and delusion of pseudo-negotiation at Munich: these were distinct manifestations of a national mentality so compelling as to appropriate many texts of the decade. Response in the 1930s ranged from the moral distress of Léon Blum and Marc Bloch, to the brooding inaction of General Gamelin, to the hideous retort of *Je suis partout* seen in the frontispiece. Part of the continuing hold of this painful decade comes from the psychological tension inherent in this gradation of response, with its terrible suggestion that there are few clear-cut answers and no easily drawn boundaries between the particular and the universal. Certainly these years can only discomfit armchair moralists.

[2] M. Bloch, *L'étrange défaite* (Paris, 1946), p. 189.